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EPA KEEPS ASBESTOS THREAT UNDER WRAPS

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The Environmental Protection Agency plans to remove *asbestos*-contaminated insulation from hundreds of homes in the Montana town where the hazardous material was produced.

The agency, however, won't extend the cleanup to millions of homes throughout the country insulated with the same material. EPA officials in Washington also rejected pleas from staff members to conduct a national public-awareness campaign about the potential health threats.

"We get calls almost daily from people asking if they've got this stuff in their attics," said Bill Dunbar, spokesman for the EPA regional office in Seattle, where contaminated insulation was found two years ago. "Who knows how many others across the country have it but don't know about it?"

Raw material for the insulation came from a now-defunct vermiculite mine outside Libby, Mont., where at least 200 miners, family members and residents have died of *asbestos*-related diseases. Hundreds of others are sick.

Mine owner W.R. Grace & Co. told the EPA this year that at least 15 million homes nationwide contain Zonolite, a loose, popcornlike insulation made with *asbestos*-contaminated vermiculite. The insulation was sold from the 1930s through the early '80s.

Grace shipped vermiculite to more than 250 processing plants throughout the country, including 18 in Ohio, leading government investigators to fear that death and disease have spread well beyond Libby.

Once in a person's lungs, microscopic *asbestos* fibers can't be coughed out. The chief health concerns are asbestosis, an incurable thickening and scarring of the lungs that gradually suffocates a person, and mesothelioma, a rare but devastating form of lung cancer.

Although EPA workers involved in the Libby investigation urged their bosses to notify the public about the risks, a news release announcing the removal of Zonolite insulation in Libby doesn't mention that homeowners elsewhere could face the same health threats.

"This action is necessary because . . . people in Libby have been chronically exposed to

asbestos by multiple exposure 'pathways' for many years," the release said.

Health agencies still say the best defense is to stay away from *asbestos*. If Zonolite isn't disturbed, *asbestos* fibers embedded in it can't become airborne and the potential risks are minimal, they say.

But scientists working in Libby fear that homeowners and contractors are unwittingly exposing themselves and their families to *asbestos* when they remodel houses that contain vermiculite insulation. They say installing even a light fixture or ceiling fan through an attic insulated with Zonolite can generate dangerous levels of fibers.

"It's not a trivial risk," Christopher Weis, an EPA toxicologist, told The Dispatch last month. "We know it's hurting people, and to not warn the public about the risks would be unethical."

During a visit to Libby in September, EPA Administrator Christie Whitman appeared to agree. She told residents that her agency's research would be shared nationwide.

"We want everyone who comes in contact with vermiculite, from homeowners to handymen, to have the information available to protect themselves and their families," Whitman said.

For now, though, EPA efforts to inform the public about the risks are limited to a page on the agency's Web site: www.epa.gov/opptintr/asbestos/insulation.htm#have.

Court documents show Grace has known about the contamination since it bought the Libby mine in 1963. The company's tests in the 1970s found that Zonolite could generate airborne *asbestos* fibers 150 times the regulatory limit for workplace exposures.

Asbestos is considered unsafe at any level. The government's 20-year-old standard is based on outdated technology to detect fibers.

Grace insists there is no proof that Zonolite is dangerous. The company lobbied the EPA to not remove attic insulation in Libby and because it would create legal and political pressure to do the same thing nationwide at taxpayer expense.

"They obviously are sparing no expense to prevent this from becoming a national issue," said Allan McGarvey, a Kalispell, Mont., lawyer pursuing a class-action lawsuit against Grace. "We're not convinced that Zonolite needs to be vacuumed out of every house in America, but something has to be done to warn people not to disturb the material. It's morally wrong if they don't."

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